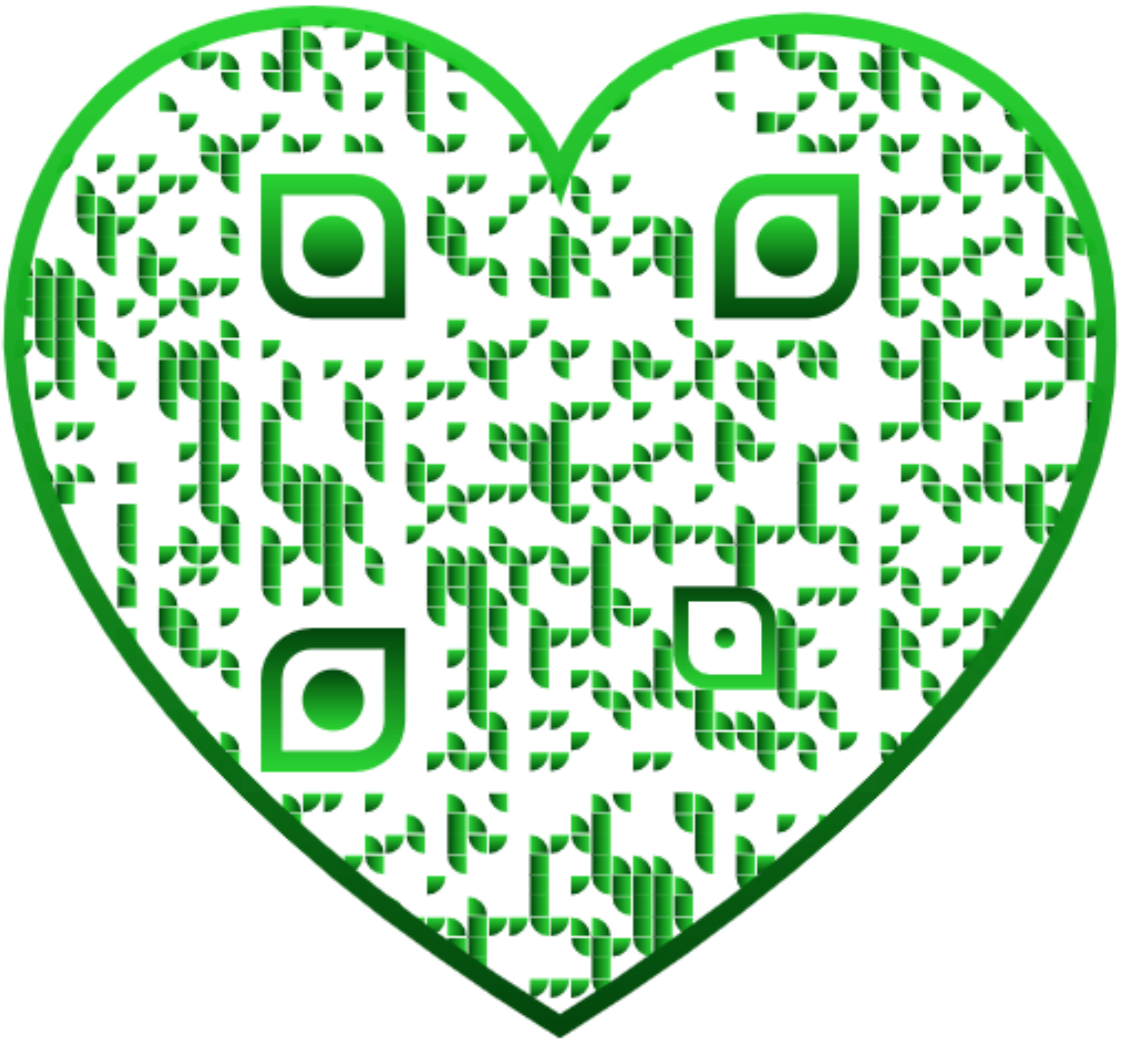
Go Deep

BY KEITH WYATT

A LOT OF MY TIME AS A TEACHER is spent jamming with students on blues progressions. Many students I encounter are quite adept at moving around the neck, and a few have clearly played and listened to enough blues to be able to phrase with personality and go beyond the clichés. Others, however, express frustration with the sameness of their playing and wonder how to break out of staid patterns. While each player has his or her own particular ruts, one large ditch shared by many is the tendency to play exclusively in the guitar's middle and high registers, leaving unexplored the soulful baritone voice of the instrument that lives on the low strings.

That's right—the low register of the guitar doesn't have to be reserved for power chording. There's melodic gold down there, and it's ours for the mining. To begin exploring the nether regions, start with a phrase you usually play in the middle of the neck. Don't make it anything fast or flashy, or something that depends on a particular position to make it work—just a good, solid, rhythmic lick. Next, take the very same notes and play them an octave down, adjusting your fingering as needed. Do you hear how different it sounds? What was just an ordinary lick now takes on a whole new personality and could even become the basis for a tune. This funky 12-bar blues in *G* (below) is laden with riffs that were created this way.

Examples of lowdown licks are everywhere. Freddie King's "Hide Away" is, in part, a medley of low-string licks. (Move any of its phrases up an octave, and they lose much of their captivating effect.) Albert Collins made a whole tune—"Don't Lose Your Cool"—out of a single repeated low note with a funky groove, Link Wray (of "Rumble" fame) has never been afraid to hang low, and Duane Eddy built an entire *career* on the bottom strings. So you see, there's a whole world of music waiting there for you on those wound strings. Reach down, grab a hold of it, and go deep.

Guitarist with Los Angeles roots-rock legends the Blasters, Keith Wyatt has created dozens of blues-themed instructional books, videos, and CD-ROMs.

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